



THE
PEW
CENTER ON THE STATES

Federal Policy Series:
April 2010

pre[k]now

a campaign of the
Pew Center on the States

Pre-K & the Race to the Top:

A Review of Early Education Proposals in States' Phase I Grant Applications

Chrisanne L. Gayl, M.P.P.

Pre-K Now
Pew Center on the States
901 E Street, NW
10th Floor
Washington, DC 20004

202.540.6350 voice
202.552.2299 fax

www.pewcenteronthestates.org/preknow

Introduction

Over the past year, many national leaders have committed to reform education and reshape America's school system. With this goal in mind, the Obama administration created a competitive grant program entitled Race to the Top (RTTT), which was passed by Congress as a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).¹ RTTT features two grant phases that will award a total of \$4.35 billion in education funding and are focused on four key policy areas — standards and assessments, data systems, great teachers and leaders and turning around the lowest performing schools.²

In calling for reform, the U.S. Department of Education also recognized that states' efforts would be strengthened through "activities that promote school readiness and ensure that all children have access to high-quality early learning programs."³ To that end, education officials included "Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes" as an *invitational* priority — that is, as a recommended strategy with no impact on scoring — in the RTTT grant application.

Forty states and the District of Columbia submitted applications for Phase 1. In March 2010, the U.S. Department of Education announced the 16 Phase 1 finalists, and later that month, Delaware and Tennessee were each awarded a grant.⁴ Though the early education section of the application is optional and is not part of the grading structure, most states, including 12 of the finalists, completed it,⁵ incorporating early education policies and practices into one or more of the four reform strategies.

This brief, "Pre-K & the Race to the Top", informs education advocates and stakeholders about the innovative strategies that states used to include pre-k in their Phase 1 proposals. Pre-K Now reviewed all 41 applications,⁶ but this brief focuses on those of the finalists,

describing the role that pre-k played in each of the policy areas targeted by RTTT and highlighting particularly innovative examples. The brief also highlights avenues advocates and stakeholders can use to make pre-k part of their states' Race to the Top Phase 2 applications.

Though the inclusion of pre-k ultimately has no bearing on RTTT award outcomes, this analysis showcases how states view pre-k within their larger context of education reform and how the early learning community can help to shape this vision with policy makers. Given this opportunity, state leaders should review the best early learning practices outlined in these applications and work to incorporate similar ideas into future reform proposals, such as Phase 2 of RTTT, the Investing in Innovation Fund and other education reform initiatives. These strategies can also form the basis for coordinated outreach to policy makers at both the state and federal levels regarding inclusion of pre-k in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Pre-K and School Reform

The Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes section of the RTTT application suggests that states include practices, strategies or programs that would improve the quality of pre-k for at-risk children.⁷ The widespread inclusion of pre-k in the more successful RTTT proposals reflects the broad recognition that education reform must begin before kindergarten if children are to have the best chance at school success. As one state application noted, "We firmly believe that we cannot turn around our lowest-performing schools unless we reach out to students before they enter the K-12 system."⁸

Among the pre-k strategies highlighted in state applications were the development of learning standards, alignment of these with standards for the later grades and the incorporation of

early education information in longitudinal data systems. Many states also mentioned increasing enrollment in or funding for public pre-k programs as an important part of improving their overall education system. Generally, state applications reflect the importance of early learning in any reform effort.

The following sections showcase many of the common strategies that states mentioned in each of the four reform areas of the application and highlight as “featured proposals” some of the more innovative approaches that states proposed.

The U.S. Department of Education recognized that states’ efforts would be strengthened through “activities that promote school readiness and ensure that all children have access to high-quality early learning programs.”

Standards and Assessments

States were asked to commit to developing and adopting common learning standards and high-quality assessments and to support the statewide implementation of both.

Many applications addressed the importance of having developmentally appropriate pre-k standards or “foundations for learning” for children to help guide instruction across different pre-k settings so that all providers can adequately prepare children for entry into kindergarten. Likewise, most states mentioned the need to align standards between pre-k, kindergarten and the later grades to ensure more continuity and to create a seamless transition for students.

A few states, including Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania, discussed plans for developing and implementing statewide school readiness assessments.⁹ Other states discussed using RTTT funds to develop ongoing assessments of the quality of individual pre-k programs or classrooms. Georgia, Illinois and New York’s applications included some particularly compelling proposals and represent the breadth of innovation in this area.

Featured Proposals:

- **Georgia** planned to utilize the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)¹⁰ to assess individual classroom’s strengths and challenges related to the different aspects of quality: emotional support for children, time and behavior management and instructional effectiveness. The results would then be used to offer programs targeted technical assistance. A separate evaluation component would measure subsequent improvement. RTTT funds would be used to form the evaluation team, conduct baseline observations, measure improvement among participating programs and study trends across all Georgia pre-k classrooms.¹¹

- **Illinois** proposed to establish a kindergarten readiness measure for all participating local education agencies. Data from the measure would be used to facilitate curriculum alignment and joint, integrated professional development across state-funded early learning programs and grades K-3.¹²
- **New York** planned to improve its current early learning standards by incorporating input from experts who are specialists in various subject areas. The state will ensure that 21st-century skills (e.g. social/emotional competency, comfort level with using different forms of technology, ability to speak more than one language) are embedded in pre-k standards and are aligned to the English Language Acquisition/English Language Learners (ELA/ELL) K-12 standards. In addition, the state intended to develop an assessment system consisting of screening, ongoing progress monitoring and outcome assessment for pre-k and kindergarten across all settings.¹³

Data System

States were asked to document the extent to which they have developed a statewide longitudinal data system with the ability to connect data from pre-k through higher education and how they would make data more accessible and useful to support instruction at the local level.

Almost every state mentioned early education as a *pro forma* part of this section. Several states indicated that children enrolled in public pre-k or Head Start had already been assigned an individual student identifier and incorporated into their state's data system, while others made brief mention of their plans for doing so. As one state noted, "the success of students in high school in large part rests with the strength of the educational component in a student's early learning years. The first steps of P-12 education, prekindergarten and

kindergarten, must be a required and accessible segment of the P-12 data system."¹⁴ Colorado's proposal embodies the spirit of this sentiment.

Featured Proposal:

- **Colorado** sought RTTT funds to enhance the capability of "SchoolView," the state's Web-based student performance tracking system, to let administrators access classroom and individual student data. All Colorado Preschool Program, Head Start and special education students are assessed through "Results Matter," Colorado's early childhood assessment and accountability system. Integrating these two data systems would inform professional development planning and assist administrators in analyzing student-achievement trends and indicators. Kindergarten teachers and principals could use these data to improve transition planning and inform the development of Individual Readiness Plans. In addition, parents would be able to access information about their children.¹⁵

Great Teachers and Leaders

States were asked to describe how they would link student achievement to teacher and principal effectiveness and how they will ensure equitable access to highly effective teachers.

States addressed a variety of reforms (i.e., improving career pathways, gauging effectiveness and ensuring equitable distribution across districts) related to teacher and principal quality in this section of their applications.

For the most part, states limited their focus to K-12 teachers, although some mentioned pre-k in their plans to strengthen professional development. In particular, they focused on enhancing training around the pre-k-to-kindergarten transition. Colorado, Kentucky, New York and Tennessee offered extensive discussions with respect to these efforts.

Featured Proposals:

- **Colorado** created a task force to develop a three-year strategic plan focused on advancing the effectiveness of early childhood teachers through improved professional development, coaching and increased compensation. The plan, which would be funded by RTTT grant dollars, would define an effective early childhood educator, identify valid and reliable evaluation measures and include in the state's longitudinal data system information about all teachers working in licensed, publicly funded early education programs. By 2011, recommendations for improving teacher preparation programs would be submitted to the Colorado State Board of Education and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. By 2012, accreditation of two- and four-year early education programs at higher education institutions would align with the state's new definition of early childhood educator effectiveness.¹⁶
- **Kentucky and New York** both offered specific proposals regarding collaboration with institutions of higher education. New York proposed establishing an early childhood component in its regional centers to bring teachers and administrators together with experts from institutions of higher education and other coaches and mentors. The state also planned to develop an early childhood online course to improve the consistency and quality of instruction across settings.¹⁷ In Kentucky, the Division of Early Childhood proposed to work with faculty in the higher education community to emphasize new early education standards, assessments and the use of CLASS in evaluating teachers and improving their effectiveness.¹⁸

“We firmly believe that we cannot turn around our lowest-performing schools unless we reach out to students before they enter the K–12 system.”

— Massachusetts’
application

- **Tennessee’s** application — one of two Phase 1 winners — calls for raising state standards to require all teacher assistants to hold a Child Development Associate (CDA) certification. In addition to improving classroom quality, this would also allow the state program to satisfy the only National Institute for Early Education Research quality benchmark it does not presently meet. Currently, high school graduates with no training in early childhood education can serve as teacher assistants in many state-funded pre-k classrooms.¹⁹ To ensure that the quality of instruction improves in all programs that serve young children, the state’s departments of education and human services also plan to make training in the Tennessee Early Learning Development Standards accessible to all child care providers and pre-k teachers. Local districts will establish collaborative agreements to allow all early childhood educators to use school system-owned computers and Internet connectivity.²⁰

Turning Around the Lowest-Performing Schools

States were asked to describe strategies to support districts in turning around persistently low-performing schools.

Many states included access to high-quality pre-k as a strategy for improving educational outcomes. The applications reflected a wide recognition among states that gaps in student achievement exist long before kindergarten entry, and that, to be successful in closing these gaps, districts must reach children earlier. The intense focus on struggling schools within RTTT, the Colorado proposal said, “requires that we ensure these schools, and other early education programs that provide services to the children entering those schools, have evidence-based, high-quality early education programs.”²¹ States differed, however, in their approaches to providing early education services, as represented by the proposals from the District of Columbia, Florida, Massachusetts and New Jersey.

Featured Proposals:

- The **District of Columbia** Public Schools (DCPS) outlined a plan to expand pre-k access, improve program quality and leverage partnerships with community-based organizations. DCPS proposed blending Head Start funds and local resources to provide comprehensive programming for all children and their families. Under this model, DCPS would invest \$2 for every federal Head Start dollar and equitably distribute the combined funds across all Title I elementary schools. This funding strategy would allow all three and four year olds in Title I schools — regardless of Head Start eligibility — to benefit from comprehensive services, such as family support services and developmental and medical screenings. In addition, the change would help DCPS build a more seamless early childhood program. All classrooms would serve children from diverse income backgrounds, provide similar services and have uniform expectations and common quality standards. The reallocation of federal and local dollars would also enable DCPS to hire 15 early childhood instructional coaches and 15 family engagement specialists, enhance professional development for pre-k staff and improve services to young children with disabilities by supporting implementation of full-inclusion classrooms.²²
- **Florida** proposed requiring districts with the lowest-achieving 5 percent of high schools to use a combination of RTTT, School Improvement Grants and Title I funds to implement a “model” full-day pre-k program at feeder elementary schools.²³ The program would feature high performing teachers, pre- and post-assessments, progress measures, family literacy and parental involvement, and district monitoring of quality. By 2014, districts with schools that still rank among the lowest-achieving 5 percent would be required to offer one additional full-day pre-k program and increase kindergarten-readiness rates.
- **Massachusetts’** application included a focus on offering pre-k services in three “wrap-around zones.” The “zones,” comprising five school districts, provide children and families with comprehensive, coordinated instructional, social and community support services through government and nonprofit organizations as part of a holistic model. Funding would support professional development opportunities, focused on aligning early literacy and math instruction with K–3 curricula. This training would be provided for educators at home- and center-based early education and care providers that serve as feeder programs for the lowest-performing elementary schools in each of the five districts.²⁴
- **New Jersey’s** plan builds upon the state’s nationally recognized pre-k program by earmarking \$10 million to expand access to more children. The 1998 Abbott²⁵ ruling required the state provide high-quality early education for all

children in the lowest-income districts. A recent evaluation of the resulting program found that participants improved in math and vocabulary skills and were 50 percent less likely to repeat a grade after two years of enrollment than their peers who did not attend.²⁶ In the state's proposal, RTTT resources would support Preschool Aid in districts that were not required to provide pre-k opportunities to all resident children.²⁷

Community Input

The process of gathering and providing input for RTTT applications varied significantly. While some states made a point of reaching out to education, early childhood and advocacy groups, others used a much less open process in drafting their plans. Understandably, this made it difficult for pre-k stakeholders to have equal impact across the country. It is worth noting, however, that those with more robust pre-k plans, such as Colorado, New York and Illinois, received input from their early education communities through open forums, requests for letters of support and other collaborative efforts.

Colorado serves as a model for this type of engagement. As a precursor to drafting its plan, the state circulated an early education white paper to generate discussion and encourage the early childhood community to come together in formal and informal meetings “to develop bold, innovative strategies and recommendations.”²⁸ Staff from Lt. Governor Barbara O'Brien's office also held regional forums to solicit input from key stakeholder groups and encouraged the submission of comments.

Conclusion: Opportunities for Action

The RTTT competition demonstrates that many state leaders view pre-k as a significant part of their education reform efforts. In addition, it showcases innovative ideas for utilizing early learning to improve student outcomes. While the RTTT competition awards funding based on the totality of states' applications, much can still be learned from the proposals concerning early education. Those states that were not selected for funding in Phase 1 will have a second chance to submit new applications for Phase 2. Further, President Obama has asked Congress for an additional \$1.35 billion in the FY11 budget to continue the competition.²⁹ No action has been taken on this request at press time.

Pre-k stakeholders should take note of the innovative strategies highlighted in this brief and engage leaders in their states around some of these ideas. The application process provides an opportunity to have serious discussions about the role of high-quality early learning in education reform. Below are recommendations for bringing attention to pre-k in Phase 2 of the RTTT process:

- Participate in town hall meetings conducted by state departments of education about their RTTT applications.
- Hold candidate forums to discuss early learning issues.
- Work with lawmakers on compliance legislation that addresses pre-k issues included in the state's RTTT application.
- Meet with state officials, P-20 councils and members of RTTT coordinating boards highlighted in some states proposals.
- Request a position on RTTT coordinating boards or a role in the review process.

Pre-k leaders should also consider meeting with local education leaders including teachers unions and school district superintendents to solicit their buy-in. In California, as a result of such engagement, state officials added language regarding early learning to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that school districts signed to be eligible for RTTT funding. Specifically, the MOU provided that pre-k quality and expansion efforts would be an allowable district-level expense of RTTT funds should California win a grant award.³⁰

For states that win awards, it will be important to ensure that pre-k components of the application and other reform efforts are implemented. Stakeholders should consider requesting a seat on state boards or councils that may be overseeing implementation of RTTT proposals.

With education reform poised as one of the top domestic priorities for the Obama administration, Congress and state leaders, now is the time to ensure all children start school ready to learn and succeed. Race to the Top grants provide states with a critical opportunity to significantly improve publicly funded education by beginning with proven strategies that build children's school readiness and provide the foundation for greater educational and life achievement.

Endnotes

1. American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 - as Amended by the Omnibus Appropriations Act, (Feb. 17, 2009). <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/statutory/stabilization-fund.pdf>.
2. See: "Race to the Top Fund: Legislation, Regulations, and Guidance," U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/legislation.html> for published notices regarding final priorities, requirements, definitions, and selection criteria for the Race to the Top Fund. The Data Systems priority area asks states to describe their efforts in implementing a longitudinal data system as outlined in The America COMPETES Act. This law requires 12 elements for a longitudinal data system, one of which is the ability to connect data from preschool through higher education.
3. "Part II: Department of Education 34 Cfr Subtitle B, Chapter II Race to the Top Fund; Final Rule and Notice," *Federal Register* 75, no. 17 (2010). <http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/finrule/2010-1/012710a.pdf>.
4. Finalists were: Colorado, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Tennessee.
5. Finalists that addressed the early learning invitational priority were Colorado, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Tennessee.
6. See: "Race to the Top Fund: States' Applications, Scores and Comments," U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/index.html>.
7. Ibid.
8. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Race to the Top - Application for Initial Funding," (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 162. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/massachusetts.pdf>.
9. "Georgia's Race to the Top Application," (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/georgia.pdf>; "New York State: Race to the Top Application," (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/>

- new-york.pdf; Build Strong Foundations for Our Youngest Children, “Summary Analysis: Early Learning in Ten Race to the Top Applications,” (Columbus, OH: Action for Children, 2010), 3. http://www.actionforchildren.org/site/DocServer/Early_Learning_Race_to_the_Top.doc?docID=803.
10. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System is an observational instrument developed at the University of Virginia to assess classroom quality, which describes multiple dimensions of teaching that are linked to student achievement and social development.
 11. “Georgia’s Race to the Top Application,” 190-91. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/georgia.pdf>.
 12. Office of the Governor Pat Quinn and Illinois State Board of Education, “The State of Illinois: Race to the Top - Application for Initial Funding,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 59. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/illinois.pdf>.
 13. “New York State: Race to the Top Application,” 243. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/new-york.pdf>.
 14. *Ibid.*, 242.
 15. “Colorado’s Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 146. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/colorado.pdf>.
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. “New York State: Race to the Top Application,” 243-44. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/new-york.pdf>.
 18. “Kentucky: Race to the Top Application,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 229-30. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/kentucky.pdf>.
 19. W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool: 2008 State Preschool Yearbook,” (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2009), 130-31. <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/TN.pdf>.
 20. “Tennessee: Race to the Top Application,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/tennessee.pdf>.
 21. Center for Education Policy Analysis, “Colorado’s Race to the Top Early Childhood Alignment Brief,” (University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs, 2010). [http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/SPA/Research/CEPA/EdStimulusFunds/Documents/Race%20to%20the%20Top%20Early%20Childhood%20Alignment%20final\[1\].doc.pdf](http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/SPA/Research/CEPA/EdStimulusFunds/Documents/Race%20to%20the%20Top%20Early%20Childhood%20Alignment%20final[1].doc.pdf).
 22. “District of Columbia: Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 174-76. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/district-of-columbia.pdf>.
 23. “Florida’s Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 200-02. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/florida.pdf>.
 24. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Race to the Top - Application for Initial Funding.” <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/massachusetts.pdf>.
 25. Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool: 2008 State Preschool Yearbook,” 94-98. <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/NJ.pdf>.
 26. Ellen Frede et al., “The APPLES Blossom: Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) Preliminary Results through 2nd Grade Interim Report,” (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2009). http://nieer.org/pdf/apples_second_grade_results.pdf.
 27. “New Jersey: Race to the Top Application,” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), E17. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/new-jersey.pdf>.
 28. Center for Education Policy Analysis, “Colorado’s Race to the Top Early Childhood Alignment Brief,” 2. [http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/SPA/Research/CEPA/EdStimulusFunds/Documents/Race%20to%20the%20Top%20Early%20Childhood%20Alignment%20final\[1\].doc.pdf](http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/SPA/Research/CEPA/EdStimulusFunds/Documents/Race%20to%20the%20Top%20Early%20Childhood%20Alignment%20final[1].doc.pdf).
 29. “Fiscal Year 2011 Budget: Summary and Background Information,” (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 20. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget11/summary/11summary.pdf>.
 30. Jack O’Connell, Theodore Mitchell, R., and Glen W. Thomas, “Memo of Understanding Letter: Letter to County and District Superintendents and Charter School Administrators on Memorandum of Understanding Dated December 14, 2009.” (Sacramento: California Department of Education., 2010). <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/el/le/yr09ltr1214.asp?print=yes>.

Acknowledgements

Chrisanne Gayl is an education consultant with more than a decade of government relations and education policy experience at the federal, state and local levels. She has served as director of federal programs at the National School Boards Association and held positions with the Workforce Alliance and the Office of the Governor of California. Ms. Gayl is the author of numerous publications on pre-kindergarten policy and practice.

David Beard, Jennifer V. Doctors
and **Albert Wat** edited this brief.

The Pew Center on the States is a division of The Pew Charitable Trusts that identifies and advances effective solutions to critical issues facing states. Pew is a nonprofit organization that applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public and stimulate civic life.
